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ABSTRACT

Universities have long been in the business of assessment, particularly the assessment of students. Recently, several national and regional accreditation agencies have mandated that universities also engage in self-assessment programs. However, assessment is not clearly defined from campus to campus. Some of the issues in educational assessment in higher education are explored and illustrated with a discussion of the assessment process as it operates at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock. To be effective, college and university assessment plans must include more than simply assessing students through examinations. They must include a comprehensive approach to determine if, and how, skills learned in classes are actually applied later on. Developing assessment plans that evaluate on-going students' achievement and long-term students-employer perceptions of the value and pertinence of the graduate's program of study allow faculty to review curricula and examine instructional practices. At the University of Arkansas, this sort of assessment has begun, with a plan developed for each faculty in a collegial, but stressful, process. The assessment process evolved to allow each faculty to evaluate assessment plans in its own college, resulting in a more positive attitude. Faculty members are more comfortable having their plans evaluated by colleagues, and the assessment process is becoming more likely to lead to program improvement. (Contains 11 references.) (SLD)

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EFFECTIVE AND INEFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT PROGRAMS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A Presentation to MSERA
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Universities have long been in the business of assessment, primarily assessment of students and, if requested, assessment of programs. In excess of 82% of the institutions of higher education in the United States are involved in assessment of programs for the purpose of measuring student outcomes (Mentkwoski, Astin, Ewell & Moran, 1991, p. i). Recently, several national and regional accreditation agencies have mandated that universities engage in self-assessment programs. These endeavors, which are mandated by law in at least eighteen states and by accrediting agencies such as the North Central Association (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 1995, p.10.), are simply designed to ensure the provision of a quality educational experience and a value added education for students at the graduate and undergraduate levels.

Unfortunately, assessment is not clearly defined from campus to campus. Rarely have universities traditionally engaged in self-assessment programs. The result of legislation and policy implemented by accrediting agencies has been a flurry of activity on most campuses to develop and implement required assessment programs. What has often been discovered is that university faculty

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who have long been engaged in assessing students have a very difficult time developing and implementing their own assessment programs.

It is on each campus that decisions are made regarding what assessment actually is and should do. This paper seeks to address the issues in educational assessment which have influenced and will continue to impact performance and performance evaluation, and some successful and some unsuccessful experiences in assessment at one institution. The session will review how the assessment program at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR) was implemented three years ago and how it has evolved from an activity that was initially met with a great deal of confusion and criticism from faculty to one that is finally being accepted as helpful in program improvement.

The decade of the 1990's is rightly called the decade of accountability. This has been the decade in which the concerns and questions which were raised relative to K-12 education in the 1980's have become issues for colleges and universities as well. For example, the Arkansas Policy Foundation, in late September of this year, published a study (The Murphy Report) funded by private industry at the request of the Governor. The report includes a set of 12 recommendations concerning K-12 education and a 13th for higher education. The 13th recommendation is for higher education in the state be studied to determine its effectiveness.

While the national goals have had far reaching implications for K-12 education and educators, changes in accreditation requirements and recent legislative activities, including such studies as the Murphy

Report, have begun to deeply impact higher education. These issues will continue to have an effect on teaching, the admission and retention of students, and even on academic freedom. In fact, the traditional model of university peer review and faculty governance has already been examined as a direct result of external assessments imposed at the state and national levels. One result with far ranging impact has been post tenure review mandated by legislative action in several states.

Regardless of the difficulties experienced on some campuses to develop assessment programs, there are strong reasons to do so. Too often, faculty teach courses using the same content and methods that have been used for years. And, often there has never been an effective program assessment to determine if what students are taught in courses results in their abilities to accomplish specific actions later. Therefore, to be effective, assessment plans must include more than simply assessing students using a final examination or scores on a standardized test. They must include a comprehensive approach to determining if, and how, skills learned in courses are actually applied later.

Colleges and universities are obliged to develop assessment plans by which on going student achievement and long term student/employer perceptions of the value and the pertinence of the graduate's program of study are evaluated. The purpose is to allow program faculty to review curriculum in light of data, to examine instructional practices, and to consider programmatic additions and/or deletions in order to better serve the students and community of consumers.

In our own university, the review of programmatic goals and the identification of skills, conceptual sets, and knowledge bases have been ongoing during the past four years. Virtually all faculty members have been involved, some more willingly than others. During the first three years, the plan developed by faculty in each program was evaluated by members of an Assessment Planning Review Committee and the Assessment Review Groups (ARG). Although the process was collegial, it was also stressful. It often produced some competition and tension as certain plans were "rated" as excellent while others are merely acceptable in the eyes of readers who may or may not speak the same educational language as those who wrote the plan.

Additional tension has been associated with the concern about results of assessment. In fact, no one is really certain how outcomes, absent negative accreditation reports, will impact either programs or individual faculty members within them. Assessment can truly help higher educators learn about the curriculum, student performance and their own teaching, if properly used. The question in many minds, however, is whether these results will be employed for other purposes, particularly those related to decisions with regard to faculty tenure, promotion, and annual evaluations. Still other issues called productivity goals may factor into the determination of college or university funding. These include retention of students from year to year; passage rate of juniors on a standardized examination (the so-called rising junior exam); a writing sample; and graduation rates.

"High stakes testing is pervasive in education." (Phillips, 1993). Faculty governance has traditionally been the decision making base

from which the parameters of faculty evaluation are derived; however, legislatively mandated testing of students adds new wrinkles to the usual evaluative criteria. Criteria for faculty evaluation traditionally has included teaching, as measured by student evaluations, peer visitation, and observation; scholarship, measured by the production of articles, monographs, texts, grants, and presentations at professional meetings; and service, including service to the university, community, and profession. Solomon (1993) noted that these areas have provided the basis for the awarding of tenure and promotion. The concern about assessment spills over into a generalized unease about the fundamental issues of tenure, promotion and, now, post-tenure review.

Lately, some cases based on (1) lack of competence, (In the Matter of Dismissal Proceedings Against Dr. Barney K. Huang, 1994); (2) unsatisfactory performance (Mary Carroll Smith v. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1980); (3) grading policies (Levi v.. University of Texas at San Antonio, 1988); and (4) poor teaching ability (Fields v. Clark University (1991) have made their way to the courts. They reflect the reality of these concerns relative to assessment and to the entire evaluation process. These cases relate to the denial of tenure for faculty members predicated at least in part on student evaluations of teaching in the classroom.

The choice which we have is to take charge of and use assessment as a demonstrable tool for improvement and change. If we do not do this, there is a high probability that the results of such assessment, whether developed on campus or mandated by the

legislature in the form of student retention, graduation rates, or a standardized instrument, may become the next legal battle ground for higher educators who have been denied tenure, promotion and/or employment. Even though such items as retention and graduation rates may be susceptible to economic trends, these standards when legislated become (1994) the law. Therefore, as Benjamin noted, in spite of inadequacies in new accreditation processes, higher educators should be active participants in reforming accreditation and continue to be involved in the process. As noted by Van Patten (1994), "the challenge of university department heads (and administrators of every stripe) is to use assessment (and other faculty productivity measures) with integrity and not to get entangled in a subtle web of political game playing..."(p. 6) If no one joins the game and all focus on our academic efforts and excellence, assessment is not a threat.

Although faculty at our institution have not engaged in this discussion of recent courts cases on a broad basis, the discomfort felt around the issue of assessment is reflected in the fact that in one college an entire program faculty refused to participate in the assessment process. In other colleges, anger at colleagues across campus was evident after the campus wide readers' panels completed their work each year. More than one faculty member has spoken of low morale directly related to the results of the assessment report review, not the results of the program assessment itself.

It was predicated on this skewed focus, i.e. report evaluation rather than assessment results, which led the Dean's Council on

campus to recommend a change in the review process campus wide. The suggested change was that the readers for each college be primarily from the college itself and that only one member of the Readers' Panel be from another college. Additionally, colleges would rotate membership on the readers' panels of other colleges so that over a period of six years, at least one representative from each college would have served on every other college's readers' panel.

The idea behind this suggestion was that faculty might tend to take suggestions or criticism more positively when it came from a colleague in the same field and college. Secondly, by having one member of the panel from another college, capacity and understanding would be developed overtime across campus of the terms, needs, assessment methodology and successes of other colleges in a less stressful environment. Finally, there was an incentive for college faculty to serve on the readers' panel since one would be working with colleagues known to them rather than on a campus wide panel comprised of representatives from multiple colleges. In otherwords, the competition changed. Programs, departments, and colleges began to compete with themselves and to focus on improvement rather than competing with other colleges.

As a result of the Dean's Council recommendations, the assessment process on campus was changed to enable college faculty to evaluate assessment plans in their own college. As noted above, this resulted in less paranoia and a more positive attitude. During the 1997-1998 academic year, the following process occurred in the College of Education.

The first activity was the appointment of the assessment committee. This was done by the Dean, who also appointed the assessment chairperson. The college assessment chairperson also served on the campus-wide assessment committee. Following appointment of the committee and chair, the committee convened to discuss the process that would be used. Individual programs developed and submitted their assessment progress reports, and in some cases, entire assessment plan revisions.

The assessment committee divided into two subcommittees. Each subcommittee was coordinated by a team member, and each subcommittee set its own work schedule. The program assessment plans were divided into two groups and assigned to an assessment subcommittee. Efforts were made to prevent individual committee members from reviewing their own assessment plans or plans from their own departments. The subcommittee members evaluated the assessment plans and progress reports independently and gave each plan a rating (1-3). Additionally, specific comments for improvement were provided for each plan. Overall ratings included acceptable, acceptable with minor revisions, and acceptable with major revisions. Strong efforts were made to provide positive feedback to faculty, especially in light of the negative feedback that some faculty had received from their assessment plan evaluations in previous years. This resulted in no plan being rated "unacceptable," which itself is a motivational and morale factor.

Following each subcommittee evaluation, the coordinators of the two subcommittees met and reconciled ratings. These final ratings were compiled and returned, along with suggestions, to

individuals who developed their program assessment reports. A summary of the college assessment plans and their ratings was developed and shared with the campus-wide assessment committee. Each college developed such a summary. The campus-wide assessment committee then provided an overall summary of the assessment plan reports and their evaluations in a report to the Provost.

The revised assessment plan development and review process worked significantly better this past year as a result of the changes made by the Dean's Council. Faculty members were more comfortable having their plans evaluated by colleagues in their college than when this was done by individuals from other colleges who did not particularly understand programs in the College of Education. This change in faculty attitude has helped move the assessment process from a mandatory activity to one which is being used for program improvement. Flattening the layers has also caused faculty to feel more in control of their programs and the process, and reflected acknowledgment of program faculty and expertise.

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